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The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security

Report of the Secretary-General

I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 68/11 and Security Council resolution 2344 (2017), in which the Secretary-General was requested to report every three months on developments in Afghanistan.

2. The report provides an update on the activities of the United Nations in Afghanistan, including political, humanitarian, development and human rights efforts, since the issuance of the previous report, on 15 December 2017 (A/72/651-S/2017/1056). The annex to the present report contains an assessment of progress made towards the achievement of benchmarks and indicators since the issuance of the report of 3 March 2017 (A/71/826-S/2017/189), in accordance with Security Council resolution 1868 (2009).

II. Relevant developments

3. The National Unity Government came under pressure owing to an extended impasse between the Presidential Palace and the Jamiat-e-Islami political party over the removal of a governor. The prolonged dispute dominated the political stage and threatened to undermine national unity. Negotiations between the two parties revived debate about the electoral system, as Jamiat-e Islami, joined by other political parties, sought to introduce changes prior to the next elections. Nevertheless, preparations for holding the 2018 parliamentary and district council elections under the current system continued, bolstered by the selection by the Independent Election Commission of a new administrative board. The executive and legislative branches developed a more constructive working relationship, as the National Assembly, the parliament of Afghanistan, passed the national budget for 2018 and approved 11 of 12 nominees for

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ministerial positions. The Government also took further steps to implement its anti-corruption strategy, and public revenue collection continued to increase thanks to improved administration services and enforcement. Private sector growth, however, was constrained by continuing security volatility, regulatory uncertainty and corruption. The security situation remained highly unstable, as anti-government elements conducted a series of high-profile attacks in urban centres, dampening public morale and threatening to undermine confidence in the Government. Those incidents also heightened tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan, as Afghan officials accused Pakistan of allowing "terrorist safe-havens" on its territory. Civilian casualties remained very high throughout 2017, with children accounting for almost a third of the casualties, and with protracted fighting leading to thousands of new displacements. Lastly, there was little progress towards peace negotiations between the Government and the Taliban.

A. Political developments

4. Since the issuance of the previous report, national politics in Afghanistan have been dominated by an extended impasse between the Presidential Palace and the Jamiat-e Islami political party, which has occupied the attention of key figures in both the Government and the political opposition, undermined national unity and distracted attention from the national reform agenda. While the proximate cause of the crisis was the decision by President Ashraf Ghani to remove Mohammad Atta Noor from his position as Governor of Balkh Province, the impasse soon revealed competing conceptions of the origins of the Government's legitimacy. As the stalemate grew more protracted, negotiations between the two parties also became a staging ground for expressing broader opposition concerns, as political parties used the crisis to intensify their long-standing demands for reforms to the electoral system and the Constitution.

5. The dispute between the Presidential Palace and Jamiat-e Islami marked the culmination of long-standing tensions between the central Government and Mr. Noor, a prominent figure in the country's north who had served as Governor of Balkh since 2004. Although he had been a key supporter of Chief Executive Abdullah during the 2014 election campaign, relations between Mr. Noor and the two National Unity Government leaders, President Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah, deteriorated over the course of 2017. By mid-year, Mr. Noor had emerged as a leading critic of the Government and was a key member of a multiparty and multi-ethnic opposition coalition (the Coalition for the Salvation of Afghanistan), which was apparently intending to contest the parliamentary elections planned in 2018. On 18 December 2017, the Government announced its acceptance of a resignation letter that Mr. Noor had submitted several months earlier. Mr. Noor rejected the validity of the letter, insisting that his exit from public office could only be negotiated by Jamiat-e Islami, the party in which he serves as Chief Executive. The following day, Jamiat-e Islami issued a statement rejecting Mr. Noor's removal as a breach of the political agreement of September 2014, which forms the basis of the National Unity Government, in particular its provisions on the appointment of senior officials.

6. Those events resulted in several weeks of negotiations between the Presidential Palace and the Jamiat-e Islami party over the terms of Mr. Noor's departure, as the Government attempted to install a replacement as Governor of Balkh Province. On 3 January 2018, the Independent Directorate for Local Governance appointed former Jamiat-e Islami commander Mohammad Dawood as the new Governor. Mr. Dawood established an office in Kabul, while Mr. Noor, remaining in the Governor's office in

Balkh, threatened to arrest Mr. Dawood if he attempted to move to the Province. The two sides accused each other of arming supporters in Balkh. Tensions reached a peak on 16 January, when Mr. Noor issued a public statement warning Mr. Dawood against travelling to Balkh to attend the funeral of his father. The two sides eventually reached a compromise, allowing Mr. Dawood to visit Balkh without incident and return to Kabul.

7. Meanwhile, in Kabul, negotiations over Mr. Noor's departure rapidly assumed a broader dimension. The President and his supporters maintained that the Constitution was the ultimate basis of the Government's authority in Afghanistan, pointing out that it clearly gave the President alone the power to appoint and remove governors. By contrast, Jamiat-e Islami leaders argued that the executive provisions of the Constitution were superseded by the National Unity Government agreement of 2014, by which the President and the Chief Executive were required to agree on senior appointments, including governors. Jamiat-e Islami insisted on the implementation of the outstanding provisions of the agreement, including plans for the introduction of electronic national identity cards, district council elections and the inclusion of party-based proportional representation in the electoral system as conditions for Mr. Noor's departure. After numerous rounds of talks, the negotiations had still failed to reach an agreement, and the impasse continued into February. Adding to the intractability of the standoff was the perception within Jamiat-e Islami and other significant political groups that they had been marginalized by the President and that this marginalization had an ethnic dimension.

8. During the dispute, both sides sought to rally the support of other political actors. The Government sent a delegation to Turkey on 13 January and again on 4 February, in an apparent overture to Mr. Noor's coalition partner, First Vice-President Abdul Rashid Dostum. Mr. Dostum, who has been residing in Ankara since May 2017, reportedly for medical treatment, and who remains under indictment for the alleged sexual assault and illegal detention of a political rival, did not overtly respond to those advances. Meanwhile, other political figures aligned themselves with the position of Jamiat-e Islami. On 3 January, Kandahar Chief of Police Abdul Raziq issued a statement in support of Mr. Noor, claiming that the Governor could not be dismissed without broad consensus in the National Unity Government. On 14 January, a group of opposition figures, including the First Vice-President's son, Batur Dostum, and prominent parliamentarians Humayun Humayun and Zahir Qadir, convened at the residence of former Vice-President and Jamiat-e Islami member Ahmad Zia Massoud in an apparent show of unity against the Government. Concurrently, opposition parties sought to reinvigorate public debate over the electoral system. On 1 February, eight political parties and coalitions, including Hizb-i Islami (Arghandiwal), Jamiat-e Islami, Junbesh-e Milli, and Mehwar-e Mardom-e Afghanistan, issued a joint statement calling upon the Government to modify the Election Law of 2016 to include a role for political parties in elections.

9. The political volatility was exacerbated by rising public frustration over insecurity, in particular in urban centres. A spate of suicide and complex attacks throughout January 2018, in particular three major attacks in Kabul that inflicted hundreds of casualties, led to widespread calls through social media for the resignation of security officials. On 29 January, Kandahar Chief of Police Raziq issued a plea for calm, calling upon people to abstain from demonstrations despite their frustrations with the Government. Demonstrations occurred in Kabul on 1 February, as some protesters blamed the Government for failing to ensure security and others rallied outside the embassy of Pakistan, accusing that country of supporting the attackers. However, in contrast with the aftermath of the attack of 31 May 2017, those demonstrations did not attract significant crowds, probably

because of fears of further attacks. In response to the violence, President Ghani escalated his rhetoric against anti-government element groups, telling a gathering at the High Peace Council on 3 February that he would no longer seek reconciliation with the perpetrators of the attacks and blaming Pakistan for harbouring the Taliban.

10. That series of attacks and the public reactions to them further hindered the already minimal progress towards initiating peace negotiations between the Government and the Taliban. There was, however, incremental progress on the implementation of the Government's peace agreement of 2016 with Hizb-i Islami (Gulbuddin). In January, over several days, 78 prisoners affiliated with the group were released in accordance with the agreement, following months of delay caused by vetting procedures. This was the third and largest release of prisoners since the signing of the agreement.

11. Against this backg. ound of political uncertainty, relations improved between the executive and legislative branches, allowing the Government to pursue some elements of its agenda. On 4 December, the lower house of the National Assembly passed confirmation votes for 11 of 12 candidates nominated by the Government for ministerial positions. Nargis Nehan, the Government's nominee for the position of minister of mines and petroleum and the only woman proposed for a ministerial post, did not receive the required number of votes, but remained in her role in an acting capacity. On 17 January, the National Assembly approved the national budget. The budget had previously been rejected by the lower house on 13 December but was approved on the second attempt by a large majority of parliamentarians, following extensive consultations between the National Assembly and the Minister of Finance.

12. The Independent Election Commission emerged from several months of indecision and made progress with preparations for parliamentary and district council elections. On 10 December, the Commission presented its voter registration concept and budget to the Government and donors, following consultations with political stakeholders and civil society. For the first time, according to the Election Law, a voter list linking voters to specific polling stations is to be created — a long-standing recommendation by numerous observer groups and the Special Electoral Reform Commission of 2016. The Commission also decided to use existing national identity cards as a basis for voter registration, rather than produce cards itself. An operational plan and regulation were approved by the Commission on 9 January and the Commission initiated the procurement of materials, with the first materials arriving in Kabul on 14 February. The Commission signed numerous memorandums of understanding with the Government, civil society organizations and other public institutions, including the Electoral Complaints Commission, to establish a mutual cooperation framework that defined the respective mandates and responsibilities. On 7 January, the Independent Election Commission also held consultations in seven provinces, bringing together representatives of political parties, coalitions, civil society organizations and other electoral stakeholders. The fourth national election forum was held in Kabul on 14 February.

13. Steps were also taken to address leadership gaps in the Commission, after the removal of its Chair in November and the dismissal of the Chief Electoral Officer in October. The previous Selection Committee for electoral bodies conducted a nomination process for the vacant commissioner position, leading to the appointment of Mr. Sayyid Hafizullah Hashimi as the seventh commissioner on 13 January. The appointment enabled the Commission to conduct an internal election to designate its board, and the Commission elected former Spokesperson Gula Jan Abdulbadi Sayyad as its new Chair on 31 January. Independently, on 15 January, President Ghani

appointed Ms. Shahla Haque as acting Head of the Secretariat and Chief Electoral Officer. One of the first acts of the new Chair of the Independent Election Commission was to indicate that elections might need to be delayed from the current date in July 2018, but that they could still be held in 2018.

B. Security

14. By the end of 2017, the United Nations had recorded 23,744 security-related incidents. This was the highest number ever recorded, although it was only negligibly higher than the figure for 2016. Armed clashes continued to represent the highest proportion of incidents, at 63 per cent. There were 14,998 armed clashes in 2017, slightly more than in 2016, during which 14,977 clashes had been recorded. Incidents relating to the use of improvised explosive devices remained the second highest category of incidents, while air strikes continued at high levels. The 950 air strikes recorded in 2017 represented a 67.6 per cent increase compared with the same period the previous year. Targeted killings and abductions increased by 6 per cent compared with 2016, while suicide attacks increased by 50 per cent. The eastern region experienced the highest number of incidents, followed by the southern region, with the two regions accounting for 55 per cent of all security incidents.

15. The United Nations recorded 3,521 security-related incidents from 15 December 2017 to 15 February 2018, representing a 6 per cent decrease compared with the same period the year before. The reporting period witnessed a spike in large-scale incidents of violence, with two high-profile complex attacks and a large vehicle bombing in Kabul and an attack against an international non-governmental organization in the city of Jalalabad that took place between 20 and 27 January.

16. Despite this spate of violence in urban areas, the winter season saw a drop in the overall number of direct Taliban attacks around the country. The Taliban were not able to seize any provincial capitals or district administration centres during the reporting period, which Afghan and international security officials attributed to an intensification of air strikes by international military and the Afghan Air Force, as well as an increase in night raids by Afghan special forces. However, anti-government elements continued to place pressure on Afghan security forces, with coordinated attacks during the reporting period against Afghan National Defence and Security Forces checkpoints in Helmand, Kandahar and Nimroz Provinces in the south, Kunduz Province in the north-east, Ghazni Province in the south-east and Farah Province in the west. Those attacks inflicted significant casualties on Afghan security forces and allowed insurgents to capture weaponry and logistical supplies, but they did not result in significant territorial gains. The Taliban, however, consolidated their hold over mostly rural territory throughout 2017.

17. Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant-Khorasan Province remained resilient, despite concerted operations by Afghan and international military forces. The group conducted several attacks against the civilian population and military targets, especially in Kabul and in the eastern Province of Nangarhar, and continued to engage in armed clashes against the Taliban as the two groups competed for control over territory. Meanwhile, in the northern region, self-proclaimed Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant-Khorasan Province affiliates continued to engage in violent clashes against both Afghan Government and Taliban forces, suggesting that the group has expanded its geographical reach and begun to consolidate its presence outside the eastern part of the country.

18. There were 42 incidents involving United Nations personnel in 2017, including nine incidents of intimidation, 17 criminal incidents, one armed clash and three incidents of abduction.

C. Regional cooperation

19. Relations between Afghanistan and other countries during the reporting period were marked by growing tensions with Pakistan, following the spate of violence in January, despite high-level contacts between the Governments of both countries. On 17 December, military officials from Afghanistan, Pakistan and the United States of America met in Kabul to discuss military and counter-terrorism cooperation. On 16 January, 1,800 Pakistani clerics adopted a fatwa, or religious ruling, declaring suicide attacks to be "un-Islamic". A fatwa against violence and terrorism directed against targets in Afghanistan had been proposed as part of the Quadrilateral Coordination Group road map for peace agreed between Afghanistan, China, Pakistan and the United States in 2016. The January announcement, however, was received with scepticism in Kabul, reportedly because it did not specifically condemn terrorism and violence in Afghanistan. On 3 February, a high-level delegation led by the Foreign Secretary of Pakistan, Tehmina Janjua, visited Kabul to discuss the Afghanistan-Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity, covering the areas of military cooperation, counter-terrorism and intelligence sharing, economy, trade and transit, and refugee repatriation. This was followed by a second round of talks in Islamabad on 8 and 9 February, attended by the Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan, Hekmat Karzai. Following the second meeting, the Government of Afghanistan issued a press release stating that, while some progress had been made on the cooperation mechanism, there had been no concrete outcomes.

20. During the reporting period, the Government of Afghanistan continued to take steps towards closer regional cooperation with other neighbouring countries. Trade through the ports of Bandar Abbas and Chabahar in the Islamic Republic of Iran increased as of early 2017, marking a significant shift in the commercial relations of Afghanistan with the Islamic Republic of Iran. The Government of Afghanistan also continued to expand its relations with Central Asian States. Bilateral relations with Uzbekistan received a boost following the official visit of President Ghani on 4 and 5 December, when the two countries signed more than 20 bilateral agreements covering areas such as security and intelligence cooperation, transit and customs procedures and infrastructure.

21. International cooperation in support of a peace process in Afghanistan made limited progress. On 26 December, the Government of China hosted the Ministers for Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan and Pakistan in Beijing for a first trilateral dialogue meeting, a format suggested by the Government of China in June 2017. The three sides reaffirmed their commitment to improving relations, deepening mutual beneficial cooperation, advancing connectivity under the Belt and Road Initiative and fighting terrorism in all its forms. They also expressed support for an inclusive Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process in Afghanistan. The Government of Indonesia also increased its engagement in efforts to establish peace in Afghanistan. In December, the Government of Indonesia hosted a delegation of Afghan High Peace Council officials and affiliated ulama and offered to assist Afghan reconciliation efforts. On 29 January, during a visit to Kabul, the President of Indonesia, Joko Widodo, suggested the establishment of a tri-national committee with participation of ulama from Afghanistan, Indonesia and Pakistan, to promote peace and reconciliation efforts in Afghanistan.

III. Human rights

22. On 15 February, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) released the 2017 annual report on the protection of civilians in armed conflict.[1] The Mission documented 10,453 civilian casualties (3,438 people killed and 7,015 injured) in 2017, a decrease of 9 per cent compared with 2016. Civilian deaths decreased by 2 per cent, while the number of civilians injured decreased by 11 per cent. UNAMA attributed 65 per cent of all civilian casualties to anti-government elements, 20 per cent to pro-government forces, 11 per cent to unattributed crossfire during ground engagements between anti-government elements and pro-government forces, 3 per cent to explosive remnants of war and approximately 1 per cent to cross-border shelling. The decrease in civilian casualties is mainly attributed to fewer civilians coming to harm from ground fighting, while civilian casualties from the indiscriminate use of improvised explosive devices (in suicide and non-suicide attacks) increased. Conflict-related violence also destroyed livelihoods, homes and property, displaced families and limited access to education, health and other services.

23. The use of improvised explosive device tactics (in suicide and non-suicide attacks) caused 4,151 civilian casualties (1,229 people killed and 2,922 injured), comprising 40 per cent of all civilian casualties. This includes suicide and complex attacks, which resulted in 605 people being killed and 1,690 being injured, amounting to 22 per cent of all civilian casualties. Non-suicide improvised explosive device tactics, including the use of pressure-plate devices, accounted for 18 per cent of all civilian casualties. Ground engagements accounted for 3,484 civilian casualties (823 people killed and 2,661 injured), amounting to 33 per cent of all civilian casualties. Worryingly, UNAMA documented the highest number of civilian casualties by aerial strikes in a single year since 2009. The Mission documented 631 civilian casualties from aerial attacks (295 people killed and 336 injured), marking an increase of 7 per cent compared with 2016, with women and children comprising 62 per cent of those casualties. UNAMA documented 309 civilian casualties by the Afghan Air Force, 237 by international military forces and 76 by undetermined pro-government forces. Overall, the Mission documented 3,179 child casualties (861 children killed and 2,318 injured). While this represents a 10 per cent decrease compared with 2016, children still accounted for 30 per cent of all civilian casualties. Women casualties increased about 1 per cent, but female mortality increased by 5 per cent.

24. The start of 2018 witnessed a continuation of extreme harm to civilians from attacks by anti-government elements, occurring steadily throughout the month of January, including several egregious assaults deliberately targeting civilians in Kabul and Jalalabad. Between 20 and 27 January, three attacks killed at least 143 civilians and injured 265. On 20 January, five armed attackers opened indiscriminate fire inside the Intercontinental Hotel in Kabul and proceeded to search for hotel occupants room by room, killing 24 civilians (including 16 foreign nationals) and injuring 15. On 24 January, four suicide attackers stormed the Save the Children compound in the city of Jalalabad after detonating an explosive-laden vehicle, killing 5 civilians and injuring 21. The premises of the non-governmental organization were damaged in the attack and the nearby office of the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan was burned down. On 27 January, a suicide attacker detonated another explosive-laden vehicle painted as an ambulance outside the former Ministry of Interior compound in Kabul, killing at least 114 civilians and injuring at least 229. Two hospitals, the Afghan High

[1] UNAMA and Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Afghanistan: protection of civilians in armed conflict — annual report 2017" (Kabul, 2018).

Peace Council, several foreign diplomatic missions and civilian shops, many of which were severely damaged, are located in that area.

25. From 1 October to 31 December 2017, the country task force on monitoring and reporting verified seven conflict-related incidents targeting health facilities and health-care personnel (three by the Taliban, two by undetermined armed groups and two by the National Directorate for Security), compared with 18 incidents in the previous quarter. Three of the incidents included targeted attacks on health-care personnel (two were killed and one was abducted), two incidents of threat against health-care personnel or patients, one incident of threat on a health-care facility and one indiscriminate attack causing physical damage to a clinic. The task force verified 13 incidents affecting education facilities and education-related personnel, including four incidents of direct targeting against schools and threats against education-related personnel, three indiscriminate attacks resulting in physical damage to schools and one incident resulting in the killing and abduction of education personnel. The task force attributed nine incidents to armed groups (eight to the Taliban and one to Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant-Khorasan Province), two to pro-government militia, one to both Afghan National Defence and Security Forces and the Taliban in a crossfire incident and one to an unknown perpetrator. In addition, the military use of seven schools was verified, five by the Taliban and two by the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces.

26. During the same period, the recruitment and use of 36 boys by parties to the conflict were documented, of which five were verified (two by Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant-Khorasan Province, two by the Afghan National Police and one by the Taliban), compared with 19 verified cases in the previous reporting period. As at 31 December 2017, the Ministry of Justice had reported 171 children held on national security-related charges in juvenile rehabilitation centres across the country, compared with 300 at the end of December 2016, a decrease largely due to transfers and releases. UNAMA verified the sexual abuse of one child by the Afghan National Police and five cases of abduction involving 13 boys by the Taliban. UNAMA also verified six incidents of denial of humanitarian access (four by the Taliban, one by Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant-Khorasan Province and one by an undetermined armed group), compared with eight such incidents in the previous reporting period.

27. Justice and redress for women remained low amid the continued prevalence of violence against women. As part of the implementation of the Elimination of Violence Against Women Law of 2009, the Anti-Harassment of Women and Children Law was published on 31 December 2017, clarifying the definition of harassment in public places and strengthening complaint procedures. With United Nations support, the Ministry of Justice completed countrywide consultations on the draft family law to be submitted to the Council of Ministers and the National Assembly.

28. The Government took steps to improve gender equality in the civil service. On 10 January, the Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Service Commission issued a new policy to increase the representation of women in the civil service to 24 per cent in 2018. Finalization of the revised budget for the implementation of the plan remains to be approved.

29. On 14 January, the upper house of the National Assembly approved the consolidated text of a new anti-torture law. The draft law is currently under review by the Joint Commission of the National Assembly before its signing by the President and publication in the official gazette in March. The draft law contains a revised definition of the crime of torture in domestic law that is consistent with the definition contained in the Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading

Treatment or Punishment. It also sets out provisions allowing victims of torture to claim redress in civil and criminal courts. On 28 January, the Government carried out the death sentence on three men convicted of the kidnapping and murder of a 13-year-old boy. This is the second group of prisoners to have been executed in recent months.

30. On 31 January, the window closed for victims to make representations to the International Criminal Court regarding a request by the Court's Prosecutor to initiate an investigation into alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Afghanistan. Following preliminary deliberations, the Pre-Trial Chamber is expected to decide whether to authorize an investigation into the situation in Afghanistan.

31. During the reporting period, civil society activists and media personnel continued to face threats and attacks by anti-government elements and pro-government forces. UNAMA documented four incidents across the country. The Afghan Independent Bar Association held a series of workshops on accountability issues for lawyers, giving presentations on the new Penal Code and the draft anti-torture law. The workshops were attended by approximately 130 participants, 20 per cent of whom were women.

IV. Implementation of the Kabul Process and coordination of development assistance

32. Economic growth remained limited owing to the ongoing conflict, regulatory uncertainty and widespread corruption. Overall, estimated growth increased slightly, from 2.2 per cent in 2016 to 2.6 per cent in 2017. The forecast for 2018 is 3.2 per cent growth, provided that the security and political situation does not deteriorate significantly. There was a notable decline in growth in the agricultural sector, which accounts for the largest share of the economy. Growth in the sector was forecast to increase by only 1.5 per cent in 2017, compared with 6 per cent the previous year, while the industry and service sectors were projected to grow by 2 and 3.3 per cent, respectively. Inflation, while volatile, remained within the single digits. The trade deficit widened in the first half of 2017, as exports decreased by 3 per cent and imports increased by 8 per cent. The annual deficit, which is financed by foreign aid, is projected to reach 33 per cent of gross domestic product in 2017.

33. According to the Ministry of Finance, the Government increased revenue collection by 18 per cent to $2.44 billion in 2017, mainly through improvements in administration services and enforcement. Despite those gains, according to the World Bank in its Afghanistan Development Update, released in November 2017, the Government is expected to cover only around 40 per cent of budgeted expenditure with domestic revenue, leaving a fiscal gap of 15 per cent of gross domestic product at the end of 2017. This gap is projected to continue to widen, leaving the Government dependent on on-budget foreign civilian development assistance to maintain basic services and implement development programmes. The Government's development budget expenditure increased from 55 per cent in 2016 to 67 per cent in 2017, owing mainly to a reduced development budget. Additional reforms to the budgeting process were introduced in the national budget for 2018 and are expected to further increase expenditure levels.

34. The Government continued to invest efforts in strengthening accountability in the implementation of its development priorities through the high development councils. On 9 December, the Government presented an update to its Self-Reliance through Mutual Accountability Framework, reporting that 10 of 24 deliverables had

been completed. As part of its implementation of the Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework, the Government also continued to develop 10 national priority programmes under the guidance of the high development councils. Two national priority programmes, the Citizens' Charter National Priority Programme and the Women's Economic Empowerment National Priority Programme, which were launched earlier, made further progress in implementation, while the remaining eight are in different stages of preparation.

35. The fight against corruption remained a principal component of the Government's reform agenda. On 9 December, the President issued a decree for the implementation of the Afghanistan National Strategy for Combating Corruption, which the High Council for Rule of Law and Anti-Corruption had adopted on 28 September 2017. The head of the High Council secretariat was also appointed. In January 2018, of the nine priority ministries required under the Strategy to prepare and submit detailed implementation plans, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Transport and Civil Aviation and the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, Martyrs and Disabled had submitted their completed implementation plans to the High Council's secretariat. Three ministries were in the process of finalizing their plans, while the remaining three reported delays in the process.

36. The Government continued to prioritize reforms within the security sector, with a focus on leadership within the Ministry of Defence. On 4 February, President Ghani signed retirement orders for 164 Afghan National Army generals in accordance with inherent law personnel reforms within the Ministry of Defence. Under the reforms, the Government aims to retire 400 generals within 18 months in an effort to improve professionalism and foster generational change within the Afghan National Army leadership. The transfer of the Afghan National Civil Order Police from the Ministry of the Interior to the Ministry of Defence, a key component of the Government's four-year plan on security sector reform, also continued.

37. Efforts were made to strengthen the legal anti-corruption framework. On 27 November, the lower house of the National Assembly approved the Law on Declaration and Registration of Assets of State Officials and Employees, which had been adopted through a presidential legislative decree on 28 October. For the first time, the law required members of the National Assembly and provincial and district councils to declare assets on an annual basis. The new Penal Code, which came into force on 15 February, further consolidated the anti-corruption legal framework, with such measures as the criminalization of land usurpation and the codification of all mandatory provisions under the United Nations Convention Against Corruption. However, civil society organizations criticized the transfer of responsibility for asset registration and verification from the High Office of Oversight and Anti-Corruption to the Administrative Office of the President under the new law. In addition, the grouping of all anti-corruption investigative institutions and functions in the Office of the Attorney General has raised concerns about the lack of an independent implementation and monitoring mechanism under the Strategy.

V. Humanitarian assistance and refugees

38. During 2017, 475,433 people were newly displaced by conflict. Between 15 December 2017 and 1 February 2018, 11,668 people were displaced. The highest concentration of recently displaced people is in the eastern region, which shelters more than 141,000 or 28 per cent of all people displaced in Afghanistan since the beginning of 2017. Many displaced families have been forced to move multiple times

and have no immediate prospect of returning to their areas of origin in safety and dignity.

39. With regard to Afghan citizens living in Pakistan, on 3 January, the Federal Cabinet of Pakistan decided to grant a 30 day-extension to proof-of-registration cards, which provide temporary legal stay to Afghan refugees living in Pakistan. On 31 January, another 60-day extension was issued. In total, 1.4 million Afghans residing in Pakistan hold such a card, while another one million are estimated to live in that country without registration. The registration of those undocumented Afghans in Pakistan commenced in August 2017, and over 804,000 applications had been received as at 15 February 2018.

40. During 2017, a total of 57,411 refugees returned to Afghanistan from Pakistan, 1,202 from the Islamic Republic of Iran and 204 from other countries. These figures represent a decrease of 85 per cent compared with 2016, when a total of 372,577 refugees returned. The reduction in returns was mainly due to an improved protection environment in Pakistan, as well as increased reluctance among refugees to return to a highly volatile security environment. Suspended on 1 December 2017 for a three-month winter pause, the voluntary repatriation programme from Pakistan of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is scheduled to resume on 1 March 2018.

41. The deportation and spontaneous return of undocumented Afghans from Pakistan continued, with 3,796 arrivals (3,200 spontaneous arrivals and 596 deportees) from 17 December 2017 to 15 February 2018. Since the beginning of 2018, the total number of undocumented returnees arriving from Pakistan has reached 2,896, down from 9,084 over the same period in 2017. During the reporting period, 92,723 Afghans arrived from the Islamic Republic of Iran (44,685 spontaneous arrivals and 48,038 deportees), 65,839 arriving after 1 January 2018. Of the undocumented returnees, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) assisted 3,226 people (85 per cent) from Pakistan and 4,185 people (5 per cent) from the Islamic Republic of Iran. In total, in 2017, 462,316 undocumented Afghans returned from the Islamic Republic of Iran and 98,191 from Pakistan. Between 15 December 2017 and 15 February 2018, IOM also assisted 683 voluntary Afghan returnees from Europe.

42. To help vulnerable families to get through the winter, UNHCR and partners provided winterization assistance to more than 53,000 families from mid-December to 4 February. In addition, humanitarian partners provided more than 185,000 blankets, and more than 13,000 families received winter clothing.

43. More than 5.5 million children were reached through polio vaccination campaigns conducted in December 2017 and January 2018. At the time of writing, there had been 14 cases of polio reported in Afghanistan in 2017, of which 5 were from Shah Wali Kot in Kandahar Province, which had been inaccessible for vaccination for more than six months in 2017. With support of the United Nations, vaccination teams managed to gain access to the district in November and have completed four vaccination campaigns since. In January 2018, three cases of wild poliovirus were reported, one each from Kama district of Nangarhar Province and Shah Wali Kot and Spinboldak districts of Kandahar Province. From 12 to 16 February, a subnational campaign supported by the United Nations was conducted by the Ministry of Public Health to vaccinate 5.5 million children in high-risk districts of 21 provinces of the country.

44. Constraints on humanitarian access continued, with a total of 39 incidents affecting United Nations and aid workers from 15 December to 31 January. In 2017, a total of 388 incidents were reported, compared with 200 in 2016. The higher number can be attributed partly to the protracted nature of the conflict in certain areas of the country as well as to improved reporting. In 2017, 21 aid workers were killed, 33 injured and 149 abducted. In December, 19 incidents against health workers or health facilities were recorded, bringing the total to 143 such incidents for the entire year. Incidents against health workers and facilities represented 38 per cent of all recorded incidents against humanitarian workers in 2017.

45. A warmer winter with less than average precipitation is having a strong impact on the planting season and will affect the quality and yield of the harvest of winter cereals as well as the forthcoming spring harvest. Accumulated precipitation in more than a dozen provinces was less than one third of the average in the last quarter of 2017. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations recommended in December to provide vulnerable communities in drought-prone areas with agricultural assistance.

46. The Mine Action Service of the Department of Peacekeeping Operations continued to support the Government in fulfilling its mine action obligations, including its presidency of the Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on Their Destruction in 2018. This presidency is an opportunity to highlight the progress and continued commitments of Afghanistan on this issue at the international level. The average monthly rate of casualties from mines, explosive remnants of war and victim-activated explosive devices, referred to as "pressure-plate improvised explosive devices" in previous reporting, stands at 170 per month for 2017, an increase compared with 2016. The vast majority of casualties — 96.4 per cent — are due to explosive remnants of war and victim-activated explosive devices. The Service has been focusing on securing means to provide immediate, short-term support to those victims and is supporting the Afghan Directorate of Mine Action Coordination to develop a national strategy to assist victims as a priority in 2018.

47. The Mine Action Service and partners continued to provide risk education in communities affected by explosive hazards, as well as at encashment and transit centres to alert populations to the danger posed by landmines, explosive remnants of war and victim-activated explosive devices. In total, 602,511 people, including 3,767 returnees at encashment or transit centres, received risk education from 1 November to 31 January. During the same time period, the Directorate of Mine Action Coordination, with support from the Mine Action Service, declared seven communities free of mines, which enabled approximately 8,618 individuals across 290,500 m^2 to move freely within their communities and facilitated improved agricultural activities and market access. It is estimated, however, that 3,227 minefields, 315 battlefields and 38 contaminated firing ranges remain, affecting 1,423 communities.

48. On 15 January, the Government of Afghanistan and the United Nations jointly launched the Humanitarian Response Plan (2018–2021), in which they asked for $437 million for 2018 to assist 2.8 million people across all sectors of intervention. On 22 December 2017, the United Nations announced the first standard allocation of 2018 of more than $20 million from the Afghanistan Common Humanitarian Fund in order to start implementing the Humanitarian Response Plan. The Plan for 2017 was funded up to $317.5 million, or 78 per cent of the requested funding of $409 million.

VI. Counter-narcotics

49. The Government of Afghanistan, supported by its international partners, continued its counter-narcotics operations during the reporting period. From 1 November to 31 December 2017, Afghan law enforcement authorities conducted a total of 445 counter-narcotics operations, which resulted in seizures of 391 kg of heroin, 31 kg of morphine, 8,141 kg of opium, 2 kg of methamphetamine, 38,547 kg of hashish, 1,256 kg of solid precursor chemicals, 1,437 litres of liquid precursor chemicals and 1,590 3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA) K-tablets (synthetic drugs). These seizures resulted in 531 arrests. The opiate seizures (opium, morphine and heroin combined and calculated as morphine equivalent) recorded during 2017 were the highest since 2012. Opium prices dropped significantly (down 41 per cent from December 2016 to December 2017), owing to the record harvests reported in 2017, but a similar drop was not observed with heroin prices (a decline of 7 per cent when comparing December 2016 with December 2017). The relatively stable price of heroin is likely attributable to the high rate of opiate interdictions throughout 2017, in combination with high prices for the precursor acetic anhydride following the interdiction of shipments into Afghanistan in early 2017.

VII. Mission support

50. As at 31 January, the Mission's vacancy rates were 9.5 per cent for international staff and 6.4 per cent for national staff, compared with the approved rates of 14 per cent and 7.5 per cent, respectively. Representation of female staff, despite special measures granted for the Mission to recruit and retain more national female staff, remained very low. As at 31 January, the female representation for each category of staff stood at: 30 per cent for international staff, 35 per cent for United Nations Volunteers, 9 per cent for National Professional Officers and 7 per cent for Local level staff. Between 1 December 2017 and 31 January 2018, UNAMA conducted 122 road and 12 air missions, as well as 374 reverse outreach missions during which district representatives visited UNAMA field offices.

VIII. Observations

51. Since the previous report, another spate of horrific violence, including suicide attacks in Kabul and Jalalabad, killed and wounded hundreds of people, most of them civilians. These attacks naturally provoked public outrage, leading prominent figures to call for a renewed emphasis on military action against armed opposition groups rather than reconciliation. In the wake of such violence, the task of bringing the parties together in a credible peace process has become both more difficult and more urgent. I strongly believe that only through a negotiated peace settlement can the tremendous human suffering caused by this conflict be brought to an end.

52. Constructive engagement by international partners as well as regional consensus on peace in Afghanistan are essential to creating a conducive environment for peace talks. Given the number of platforms and processes that have emerged, it is my hope that the sum thereof will contribute to a peaceful outcome in Afghanistan. In this regard, I hope that the renewed high-level direct contact between officials of Afghanistan and Pakistan will reverse the recent increase in tensions between the two countries. I urge the two Governments to continue to engage in dialogue at all levels to promote peace, stability and the mutual interests of both countries. I welcome the

trilateral dialogue of Ministers for Foreign Affairs facilitated by the Government of China in December 2017.

53. The impasse between the President's supporters and Jamiat-e Islami has exacerbated divisions within the National Unity Government, placing additional pressure on already fragile political arrangements. The restraint shown by all parties so far has helped to ensure that these tensions have been confined to the political realm and have not escalated into violent confrontation. The crisis has, however, already diverted attention from urgent policy issues, and I am concerned that its prolongation may provoke instability and further delay elections. Restraint from the use of violence must be paired with political flexibility in negotiating a solution. I stress the need to resolve the dispute peacefully and expeditiously to enable the Government to focus on the myriad security, humanitarian, development and governance challenges facing Afghanistan.

54. The Independent Election Commission has appointed its new Chair and administrative board and is taking steps towards commencing voter registration. Electoral preparations must be accelerated if credible parliamentary and district council elections are to be held in 2018. This will depend on not only the work of the Independent Election Commission and the Electoral Complaints Commission but also the coordinated efforts of other government entities, as well as the availability of sufficient funding and the provision of adequate security measures. I encourage the electoral management bodies to work closely with relevant institutions and civil society to ensure timely and transparent electoral preparations. Noting the ongoing public concern about the feasibility of timely elections, I also encourage all stakeholders, including political actors, civil society representatives and religious leaders, to work constructively with the electoral management bodies to strengthen public confidence in the electoral process.

55. The persistently high numbers of armed clashes and their corresponding impact on civilians remain a deep concern. The year 2017 marked the highest number of recorded civilian casualties from the indiscriminate use by anti-government elements of suicide improvised explosive devices. The first months of 2018 saw a particularly brutal series of attacks by anti-government elements deliberately targeting civilians, including the targeting of aid organizations and foreigners and the misuse of the protected emblem of the Red Crescent Society on a vehicle painted as an ambulance to transport a suicide improvised explosive device into a restricted access area. The perpetrators of these atrocious acts must be held accountable.

56. The toll in lives lost to mines, explosive remnants of war and pressure-plate improvised devices remains high. Noting the Government's obligation to track, mark and remove explosive remnants of war pursuant to the Protocol on Explosive Remnants of War to the Convention on Prohibitions or Restrictions on the Use of Certain Conventional Weapons Which May Be Deemed to Be Excessively Injurious or to Have Indiscriminate Effects (Protocol V) and the obligations of international military forces to assist the Government in ensuring that leftover devices are destroyed, the United Nations stands ready to provide necessary support as designated in article 3 of Protocol V.

57. The Government has made commendable efforts in implementing the Law on the Elimination of Violence against Women as well as upholding Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) on women and peace and security. By reinserting the chapter on the elimination of violence against women into the Penal Code and finalizing its third periodic report to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, the Government can send a reassuring signal to all Afghans of its

commitment to protecting the lives and rights of women. Furthermore, by providing human and financial resources, the Government can ensure the effective implementation of its national action plan for the implementation of resolution 1325 (2000), which would strengthen the meaningful participation of women in political, peace and security processes.

58. The continued judicial executions in the country are a source of concern. Those who are investigated, prosecuted and sentenced for capital offences are not being afforded the necessary fair trial guarantees provided for under domestic law and the international human rights conventions to which Afghanistan is a party. I call upon the Government of Afghanistan to place a moratorium on the death penalty with a view to its abolition.

59. The Government has taken further steps towards implementing its anti-corruption strategy, in particular by strengthening the legal framework on anti-corruption. By approving the Law on Declaration and Registration of Assets of State Officials and Employees, the National Assembly took an important step towards improving the transparency and accountability of the political institutions of Afghanistan. Noting the concerns raised by civil society groups about the transfer of responsibility for asset registration from the independent High Office of Oversight and Anti-Corruption to the Administrative Office of the President and the consolidation of anti-corruption investigative functions in the Office of the Attorney General, I encourage the Government to develop an independent monitoring mechanism under the strategy.

60. In the year since it was established, the Anti-Corruption Justice Centre has performed commendable work in prosecuting high-level officials, with a particular focus on ending impunity in the security sector. Recently, however, the number of accused persons being tried in absentia has increased, owing to the lack of enforcement of arrest warrants. I encourage the Ministry of the Interior and other relevant entities to cooperate with the Centre to ensure that accused persons are brought to face trial.

61. In the face of significant security and governance challenges, Afghanistan has made considerable progress on its fiscal reform agenda. The Government continued to improve its public revenue collection and introduced reforms to the budgetary process, which have brought the national budget into closer alignment with international standards. Despite these gains, projected economic growth figures for Afghanistan, while improving, are not yet sufficient to absorb the hundreds of thousands of expected new entrants into the labour market in the coming years. Acknowledging the real progress made in the fiscal arena, I encourage the Government to introduce further policy reforms that can help generate private sector growth and provide job opportunities to the next generation of Afghans.

62. I thank all United Nations personnel in Afghanistan and my Special Representative for Afghanistan and Head of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, Tadamichi Yamamoto, for their continued dedication under such challenging conditions to fulfil our commitments in support of the people of Afghanistan.

Annex

Progress achieved against benchmarks

I. Security

Benchmark: sustainable Afghan security institutions and processes capable of ensuring peace and stability and protecting the people of Afghanistan

Indicators of progress	*Metrics*
Increase in the number of national police and national army personnel mentored, trained and operational according to an agreed structure	• In January 2017, President Ashraf Ghani announced the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces road map with four key objectives to be achieved by 2020: to increase fighting capabilities; to develop leaders; to ensure the unity of command and military efforts; and to counter corruption. • In 2017, the authorized force level of the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces was 352,000 Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police personnel and 30,000 Afghan local police personnel. The overall authorized strength of the Ministry of Defence was 195,000 military personnel and 5,502 civilians, while the authorized strength of the Afghan National Police was 157,000 personnel. • In 2017, the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces increased their offensive capabilities by initiating the expansion of the Afghan Special Security Forces and the modernization of the Afghan Air Force, including major portions of the Afghan Border Police and the Afghan National Civil Order Police. The expansion of the Afghan Special Security Forces will result in an increase in the force level, from 19,022 personnel authorized for 2017 to 33,896 by 2020. The number of Afghan Air Force personnel authorized for 2017 was 8,407, while the number authorized for 2018 is 8,626. The Afghan Air Force received its first two UH-60 Black Hawks in late September 2017 and is due to more than double the size of its fleet by 2020. • In 2017, the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces began to target corrupt and criminal influences in their ranks, referring cases to the Anti-Corruption Justice Centre and other prosecutorial bodies. Further work is needed in the Forces to improve vetting and tackle networks and nepotism.

II. Peace, reintegration and reconciliation

Benchmark: national dialogue and regional engagement towards pursuing constructive and inclusive processes to foster a political environment conducive to peace

Indicators of progress	*Metrics*
Development and implementation of inclusive national and regional processes to enhance peace, reintegration and reconciliation efforts	• On 6 June 2017, the Government convened the first meeting of the Kabul Process for Peace and Security Cooperation, bringing together representatives of 26 countries and organizations, including the United Nations. At the meeting, which was organized with technical assistance from the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), participants expressed support for an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process and for regional security cooperation. • In June 2017, the High Peace Council was restructured, and a new Chair, Karim Khalili, was appointed. Under the new structure, the Council has a total of 52 members, of whom 12 are women. • In September, the High Peace Council adopted a new operational strategy with a streamlined mandate, focused on public outreach and national consensus-building. In the same month, donors agreed to continue to fund the Council's operational costs for three-month terms on a rolling basis and to fund outreach activities on a project basis. • On 20 November, the National Security Adviser, Hanif Atmar, presented the Government's initial strategy on peace and reconciliation to a meeting of representatives of the international community. • In November and December, UNAMA coordinated and provided inputs to the international community on a set of common messages to assist the Government in finalizing its peace strategy. Many of the points raised by the international community were taken into account in the Government's subsequent draft vision paper in early January 2018. • Following the peace agreement of September 2016 between the Government and Hizb-i Islami (Gulbuddin), the leader of Hizb-i Islami (Gulbuddin), Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, returned to Kabul in May 2017. By 17 January 2018, 160 prisoners affiliated with the group had been released from Pul-e Charkhi, Bagram and Kandahar prisons in furtherance of the peace agreement.
Increased ability by the Afghan authorities to gather and provide substantiated, updated and accurate information to the Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution 1988 (2011)	• In 2017, the Government continued to provide substantiated, updated and accurate information to the Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution 1988 (2011) • On 5 May 2017, the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted its eighth report, pursuant to resolution 2255 (2015), concerning the Taliban and other associated individuals and entities constituting a threat to the peace, stability and security of Afghanistan (see S/2017/409). The report was based in large part on information provided by the Afghan authorities.

Indicators of progress	*Metrics*
	• When the Security Council Committee visited Afghanistan on 29 and 30 October 2017, the Chief Executive, Abdullah, reiterated the Government's commitment to pursuing individuals and entities using the sanctions mechanisms. Further action remains pending.
Increased public support for the peace process through engagement at the community level and with civil society	• In 2017, UNAMA facilitated a total of 14 local peace initiatives and provided mediation support to foster Afghan-led mediation and reconciliation efforts at the provincial and district levels. The initiatives, involving stakeholders from 16 provinces, included conflict resolution initiatives, community dialogues, jirgas and outreach gatherings with ulama (religious clerics), tribal representatives, provincial council members, provincial peace council members, government officials and youth and women activists.
	• On 25 December 2017, the High Peace Council organized a gathering of more than 700 religious scholars in Kabul. At the gathering, religious leaders agreed upon a declaration expressing support for Afghan-led peace efforts, including direct talks between the Government and the Taliban, and called upon the Taliban to renounce violence.
	• To mark the Global Open Day on Women, Peace and Security in 2017, UNAMA and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women organized dialogues from 17 October to 22 November, which attracted 364 participants, including 303 women from 21 provinces. The theme of the dialogues was "Women's participation in the electoral process".

III. Governance and institution-building

Benchmark: extension of government authority throughout the country through the establishment of democratic, legitimate, accountable institutions, down to the local level, with the capacity to implement policies and to become increasingly capable of sustaining themselves

Indicators of progress	*Metrics*
Increased ability of the Afghan authorities and independent electoral institutions to manage and conduct genuine and periodic elections, with due regard to women's participation and constitutionally guaranteed quotas	• In 2017, the Independent Election Commission demonstrated its ability to commission technical studies, consider options for introducing technology into electoral processes, conduct public outreach and conclude cooperation agreements with key partners, both national and international.
	• On 21 February 2017, the Commission submitted a technical study on electoral constituencies to the Government, in which it proposed the division of 12 large provinces with more than five seats into smaller constituencies, leaving the remaining 22 provinces unaffected.
	• On 22 June, the Commission announced that parliamentary and district council elections would be held on 7 July 2018.
	• On 25 October 2017, the Commission announced its decision to revert to a paper-based voter registration option.

Indicators of progress	*Metrics*
	• On 20 November, the Commission and the Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Service Commission signed a memorandum of understanding regarding the recruitment of Commission staff, aiming to accelerate the process and set up a mechanism to ensure transparency.
	• In November 2017, the Commission signed a memorandum of understanding with the Afghanistan Central Civil Registration Authority, which provided clarification on the roles of the two institutions in relation to voter registration.
	• On 10 December, the Commission submitted the voter registration concept and budget to the Government and donors following consultations with political stakeholders and civil society. The voter registration operational plan and regulations were subsequently approved on 9 January 2018. For the first time, as envisaged in the Election Law of 2016, a voter list linking voters to specific polling stations will be created using national identity cards.
	• On 11 December 2017, the Independent Election Commission announced that it had approved the locations of 7,355 polling centres following a review of locations that had commenced in August 2017. The Electoral Complaints Commission has also begun to review nearly 400 complaints in relation to the assessment of polling centres.
	• By the end of January 2018, leadership gaps in the Independent Election Commission had been partially addressed through the appointment of Shahla Haque as acting Head of the Secretariat and Chief Electoral Officer. Her appointment followed the dismissal of the previous Chief Electoral Officer, Imam Mohammad Warimach, by President Ghani in October 2017. Ms. Haque is the first woman to be appointed Chief Electoral Officer of the Commission. Following the dismissal of the Chair of the Commission, Najibullah Ahmadzai, in November 2017, a new Commissioner, Sayyid Hafizullah Hashimi, was appointed by President Ghani on 13 January 2018 in a process criticized by some civil society activists. On 31 January, the Commission elected Gula Jan Abdulbadi Sayyad as its new Chair. Wasima Badghisi, a woman who was re-elected Deputy Chair for Operations in January, had served as Chair before Mr. Sayyad was elected.
	• On 4 October 2017, UNAMA, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Independent Election Commission and the Electoral Complaints Commission signed the project document for electoral support, enabling continued United Nations assistance to electoral processes in Afghanistan. On 30 December, key donors pledged to fund up to 90 per cent of the voter registration budget, estimated at $28 million, while the Government would cover the remaining costs.

Indicators of progress	*Metrics*
	• The Independent Election Commission and the Electoral Complaints Commission held three national election forums in Kabul, on 19 September, 20 October and 6 December, with representatives from civil society groups, political parties and coalitions, tribal elders and other Afghan political stakeholders. On 7 January 2018, the Independent Election Commission held its first set of provincial-level elections forums in Balkh, Bamyan, Herat, Kandahar, Kunduz, Nangarhar and Paktya, and there are plans to hold such forums on a regular basis in all provinces.
Establishment of the Independent Joint Anti-Corruption Monitoring and Evaluation Committee and development of anti-corruption benchmarks	• On 19 January 2017, the Independent Joint Anti-Corruption Monitoring and Evaluation Committee released its eleventh six-month report, covering the period from July to December 2016. The report included a discussion of the Committee's collaboration with the Ministry of Public Health in implementing recommendations of the Committee.
	• On 7 July, the Committee released its special report on vulnerabilities to corruption in the Office of the Afghan Attorney General, in which it noted that the Office of the Attorney General had introduced a number of positive internal organizational changes, including performance monitoring and evaluation and compliance with merit-based recruitment.
	• With regard to progress in its monitoring and evaluation programme, the Committee issued 261 recommendations in 2017, 55 of which have been implemented, bringing the total number of recommendations issued and implemented since 2010 to 862 and 215, respectively.
Empowerment of anti-corruption institutions to enable them to oversee a whole-of-government approach to anti-corruption	• A new Land Management Law was issued by presidential decree on 4 March 2017. The law makes the administration of public land more efficient and transparent and reduces institutional vulnerabilities to corruption. In April, a revised land allocation law was drafted with substantial input from UNAMA and the United Nations Human Settlements Programme. The aims of the law are to streamline processes, increase transparency and reduce institutional vulnerabilities to corruption in the allocation of public land. The law is awaiting presidential endorsement.
	• On 28 September, the High Council for Rule of Law and Anti-Corruption adopted the Afghanistan National Strategy for Combating Corruption. On 9 December, a presidential order was issued for the implementation of the strategy by nine priority ministries. As at 31 January 2018, three of the nine priority ministries had submitted anti-corruption action plans and three were in the process of finalizing their plans.
	• On 3 October 2017, the President inaugurated the multi-stakeholder forum of the Open Government Partnership in Afghanistan, comprising representatives of the Government, civil society and the private sector. The Partnership is a global compact under which member States commit to engaging non-State actors to make governance more accountable and transparent.

Indicators of progress	*Metrics*
	• On 28 December, the President approved the national action plan for the Open Government Partnership, consisting of 11 commitments, including the development of a protection policy for women in conflict and emergency situations and the establishment of special courts to address violence against women in 12 provinces. Afghanistan joined the Partnership in 2016.
Annual publication of the asset declarations of public officials	• In 2017, the High Office of Oversight and Anti-Corruption issued asset declaration forms to 5,661 senior government officials, received 2,673 completed forms and verified 47 submissions, bringing the total number of forms issued, received and verified since the establishment of the asset declaration programme in 2008 to 16,508, 10,061 and 280, respectively. The 280 verified forms include those of the President, the Chief Executive, the Second Vice-President, all the Cabinet Ministers and 33 of 34 provincial governors. The low level of verification of assets is due to limited cooperation by the targeted officials.
	• On 28 October 2017, the President issued Legislative Decree No. 1270, transferring the assets registration and verification function from the High Office of Oversight and Anti-Corruption to the Administrative Office of the President to improve compliance.
Increased capacity of civil servants at the central, provincial and district levels to discharge functions and deliver services	• In 2017, the Civil Service Training Institute trained 2,540 civil servants, including 533 women (21 per cent), which represented 65 per cent of the target of 3,850. The Training Institute could not achieve its target owing to significant delays in the recruitment of trainers. The civil servants were trained in computer applications, the English language and human resource management, as well as administration and financial management.
Increased transparency and effectiveness of civil service appointments	• In 2017, the Independent Directorate of Local Governance facilitated the appointment of 275 of 386 district governor positions and 33 of 41 deputy provincial governors positions through a merit-based recruitment system. Of the persons appointed, only one deputy provincial governor and two district governors were women.
Strengthened civil service reform supported by a comprehensive approach to capacity-building and donor-funded technical assistance	• On 11 March 2017, a new Chair began work at the Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Service Commission as part of an initiative to strengthen the implementation of civil service reforms. In 2017, the Chair facilitated the appointment of new commissioners and began to develop a five-year strategic plan with the objectives of institutionalizing merit-based recruitment in Government, maintaining a competitive compensation package in the civil service and prioritizing reforms in key areas, such as pensions and the reintegration of returning Afghan refugees.

Indicators of progress	*Metrics*
	• The Government took steps to improve gender equality in the civil service. On 10 January 2018, a new policy was issued to increase the representation of women in the civil service from 15 per cent in 2017 to 17 per cent in 2018. The policy introduces a quota system, special administrative privileges, workplace protection and better career development opportunities for women in the civil service.
Implementation of the subnational governance policy and development of subnational regulatory, financing and budgetary frameworks	• In 2017, the Independent Directorate of Local Governance, with support from UNAMA and UNDP and in consultation with national and subnational institutions, civil society and the international community, facilitated the formulation of a draft subnational governance policy. On 10 January 2018, the Directorate presented the draft policy to the President for endorsement, after which it will be submitted to the Cabinet for approval.
	• In February 2017, the Ministry of Economy, with the support of UNAMA, facilitated the formulation of the provincial development plans for 2017 in all 34 provinces, using the provincial planning guidelines that it had developed in 2016. In November 2017, the guidelines were reviewed and revised, and, in January 2018, the Ministry of Economy launched an orientation programme for line departments in all 34 provinces on the revised guidelines in preparation for the provincial planning process of 2018.
Development and publication of criteria for administrative boundaries	• In 2017, after the criteria for administrative boundaries in urban areas had been developed, four municipal boundaries were completed and mapped, bringing the total number of boundaries mapped to 26 of 34 provincial municipalities. Boundaries for 820 urban neighbourhoods were also mapped during the year.
Establishment of adequate infrastructure for functioning government institutions, especially at the subnational level	• In 2017, three citizen service centres of offices of provincial governors were constructed to increase the access of citizens to the issuance of national identity cards and other government services. In addition, 13 offices of provincial governors and 11 municipalities were equipped with Internet infrastructure to improve information technology management systems and enable improved communication with constituents. Eight small-scale infrastructure projects enabled municipalities to improve the delivery of services, benefiting 157,168 citizens, including 45,728 women.
Establishment of credible and accessible judicial and penal systems that respect and uphold the human rights of all citizens	• On 4 March 2017, the President endorsed the revised Penal Code, which consolidates crimes and punishments into a single code and incorporates provisions of international law, including international human rights conventions and treaties. Improvements to the Code include the adoption of modern, gender-neutral definitions of crimes, such as rape, the prohibition of the use of torture, the prohibition of land-grabbing, the criminalization of and the imposition of strict punishments for the practice of *bacha bazi* and a significant reduction in the number of crimes that are punishable by death.

Indicators of progress	*Metrics*
	• In 2017, the Anti-Corruption Justice Centre, which was established in 2016, embarked on the processing of more complex cases involving senior government officials, in particular individuals from the security sector. As at 31 January 2018, the Centre had processed 27 cases involving 114 accused persons at the primary court level, including 14 generals from the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of the Interior and 3 deputy ministers, who were convicted of offences and subjected to prison terms ranging from 1.5 to 14 years.

IV. Human rights

Benchmark: improved respect for human rights of Afghans, in line with the Afghan Constitution and international law, with particular emphasis on the protection of civilians, the situation of women and girls, freedom of expression and accountability based on the rule of law

Indicators of progress	*Metrics*
Reduction in the number of incidents of unlawful use of force and intimidation of civilians, through compliance of relevant actors with international law	• In 2017, UNAMA documented 10,453 civilian casualties (3,438 people killed and 7,015 injured), a decrease of 9 per cent compared with 2016. UNAMA attributed 65 per cent of the civilian casualties to anti-government elements, 20 per cent to pro-government forces, 11 per cent to unattributed crossfire during ground engagements between anti-government elements and pro-government forces, 3 per cent to explosive remnants of war and approximately 1 per cent to cross-border shelling from Pakistan into Afghanistan. The combined use of improvised explosive device tactics caused 4,151 civilian casualties (1,229 people killed and 2,922 injured), comprising 40 per cent of all civilian casualties in 2017, followed by ground engagements accounting for 3,484 civilian casualties (823 people killed and 2,661 injured). Conflict-related violence continued to kill and injure women and children in 2017. UNAMA recorded 3,179 child casualties (861 children killed and 2,318 injured), a 10 per cent decrease compared with 2016. The Mission documented 1,224 women casualties (359 women killed and 865 injured) in 2017, an increase of less than 1 per cent, although female mortality increased by 5 per cent. Women comprised 12 per cent of conflict-related civilian casualties. • In 2017, the Tawheed Centre in the Office of the National Security Council, with support from the Resolute Support Mission of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, created a database to strengthen the Government's capacity to track conflict-related civilian casualties. In addition, the Resolute Support Mission trained 305 officers of the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces in measures to mitigate civilian casualties.

Indicators of progress	*Metrics*
	• The Civilian Casualties Avoidance and Mitigation Board held three meetings in 2017, on 15 February, 23 August and 5 December, during which it addressed practical efforts undertaken by the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces and international military forces to improve the protection of civilians.
	• In 2017, the Afghan National Police established 12 additional child protection units, bringing the total number of units to 33, covering 33 of 34 provinces in the country.
	• UNAMA and the United Nations Children's Fund trained 22 communication officers of the National Directorate of Security, 17 chiefs of police in Kabul district and 11 teachers on the protection of children in armed conflict in 2017.
	• In May 2017, the revised Penal Code was published in the Official Gazette. It includes provisions prohibiting and criminalizing the recruitment and use of children by armed forces and a new chapter criminalizing the practice of *bacha bazi*. It also introduces definitions of international crimes in line with the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.
	• In August, the Government ratified the Convention on Prohibitions or Restrictions on the Use of Certain Conventional Weapons Which May Be Deemed to Be Excessively Injurious or to Have Indiscriminate Effects of 1980, including all amendments and Protocols thereto.
	• In October, the Government formally endorsed the national policy on the prevention and mitigation of civilian casualties, the aim of which is to protect civilians from conflict-related harm.
	• On 17 October, UNAMA held its second annual civil-military dialogue on the protection of civilians in Kabul, during which high-level government and military representatives and the international protection community discussed plans to meet obligations under the Protocol on Explosive Remnants of War to the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons and the implementation of the national policy on the prevention and mitigation of civilian casualties.
	• On 5 December, the Ministry of Defence launched its child protection policy, which focuses on the prevention of six grave child rights violations in armed conflict and the use by the military of education and health facilities.
Improved awareness by Afghans of their rights and by the Government of its obligations	• In 2017, UNAMA published six reports on the protection of civilians in armed conflict, including two special reports. UNAMA utilized the reports for awareness-raising and advocacy to promote respect for international humanitarian and human rights laws by all parties to the conflict.

Indicators of progress	*Metrics*
	• In March 2017, the Anti-Torture Law and the new Penal Code were issued by presidential decree, both of which contain a definition of torture in line with the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.
	• On 24 April, UNAMA released its fourth public report on the treatment of conflict-related detainees, which covered the period from January 2015 to December 2016. The release of the report coincided with the second periodic review of Afghanistan by the Committee Against Torture.
	• In April, the Government indicated its intention to withdraw its reservation to the Convention against Torture, and the Cabinet approved, in principle, the decision to ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention. In its voluntary pledges and commitments submitted on 6 September 2017 as part of its candidacy for membership of the Human Rights Council, the Government confirmed its continued commitment to ratifying the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture (see A/72/377), although implementation of those commitments remains pending.
	• In June, credible reports indicated that the President had issued an order for the execution of 11 death row prisoners in retaliation for the suicide attack in Kabul on 31 May, which killed 92 people and injured 491. As a result of the advocacy of UNAMA, the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions issued an urgent appeal calling for the executions to be stopped until the right to a fair trial could be upheld. As a result, the planned executions did not take place.
	• In September, the President endorsed an annex to the Anti-Torture Law, which includes a provision for victims of torture to bring legal claims for redress before criminal and civil courts. The Law and the annex thereto were consolidated into one unified text, which was approved by the upper house of the National Assembly on 14 January 2018. The text is awaiting the President's signature and is expected to be published in the Official Gazette in March 2018.
	• In November 2017, the Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court made a request to the Pre-Trial Chamber for authorization to initiate an investigation into alleged international crimes committed in Afghanistan since May 2003, including the war crime of torture committed by the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces. UNAMA continues to promote accountability and to support efforts to address impunity for human rights abuses.
Improved impact of, and support for, legal and policy measures to combat violence against women and girls	• In 2017, the proportion of women in the Afghan National Police increased by 8 per cent, to 3,379. To address the sexual harassment of women in the police force, the Ministry of the Interior continued work to finalize its internal complaints procedure.

Indicators of progress	*Metrics*
	• In 2017, prosecution offices for the elimination of violence against women were established in all 34 provinces. Female prosecutors are present in 25 of the 34 provincial offices.
	• In 2017, the Government continued its efforts to increase the role of women in peace processes. On 2 July, 5 new female members were nominated to the High Peace Council, thereby increasing the representation of women to 12 members of a total of 63, with 4 women in the Executive Board and 8 women in the General Assembly.
	• In 2017, the Government continued to implement the national action plan for the implementation of Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) on women and peace and security to increase the participation of women and incorporate gender perspectives in the promotion of peace and security, and to take measures to protect women and girls from gender-based violence in armed conflict. Discussions continue between the Government and donors about the funding mechanism and budget for the national action plan.
	• In 2017, UNAMA continued efforts to increase the participation of women in the Afghan civil service, in political and social spheres of life and in peace negotiations. Such efforts included the dialogues to mark the Global Open Day on Women, Peace and Security from 17 October to 22 November. The dialogues focused on strengthening the participation of women in all aspects of the electoral process across Afghanistan.
	• The new Penal Code reduces the severity of the punishment under the law for women who commit certain crimes, including adultery. In August, however, the chapter on violence against women was removed from the Code, which was viewed by some as a setback in upholding the Government's commitment to protecting the lives and rights of women.
	• The Government, on 8 March 2017, launched the Women's Economic Empowerment National Priority Programme and, on 8 August, established the Executive Committee on Women's Empowerment to facilitate high-level coordination among national and international stakeholders.
	• On 18 April, the First Lady of Afghanistan launched the national plan of action to eliminate early and child marriage (2017–2021).
Improved awareness of, and support for, legal and policy measures related to combating impunity and furthering transitional justice	• In 2017, UNAMA continued to engage with civil society, the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission and the Government to end impunity for human rights violations and seek justice and redress for victims.

Indicators of progress	*Metrics*
	• UNAMA raised awareness about provisions in the peace agreement of 2016 between the Government and Hizb-i Islami (Gulbuddin) that grant leaders of the group immunity and foresee the release of most prisoners affiliated with the group, which could preclude the prosecution of individuals who may be legally responsible for war crimes, genocide, crimes against humanity and other gross violations of human rights.
	• In 2017, UNAMA engaged with the Transitional Justice Coordination Group, comprising 20 civil society organizations, to promote efforts for sustainable peace and reconciliation processes. On 26 November, the Group expressed its support for the decision of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court to request the Pre-Trial Chamber to initiate a formal investigation into human rights abuses in Afghanistan.
	• In 2017, UNAMA finalized 34 provincial road maps for peace resulting from local consultations conducted in previous years. Provincial road maps will serve as tools for civil society organizations to engage with the Government to promote respect for the rule of law and human rights and to address impunity.
Government fulfilment of reporting requirements on international human rights covenants and conventions and implementation of the recommendations emanating from the universal periodic review of Afghanistan under the auspices of the Human Rights Council	• In March 2017, the Government began to draft the third periodic report of Afghanistan to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, which was due to be submitted in July 2017 but is now expected to be submitted in March 2018.
	• In April, UNAMA gave a briefing to the Committee against Torture in closed session in Geneva ahead of the review of the second periodic report of Afghanistan.
	• On 15 August, the Government issued a standing invitation to all special procedures of the Human Rights Council, indicating its willingness for continued engagement with the United Nations human rights mechanisms to promote respect for human rights in the country and to benefit from the expert assessment and recommendations of mandate holders.
	• On 16 October, Afghanistan was elected by the General Assembly to be a member of the Human Rights Council for three years from 1 January 2018. Work is under way to implement the voluntary pledges and commitments of the Government, which contain elements on strengthening the rule of law, the rights of women and children, internally displaced persons and refugees and accountability.
Increased capacity and commitment of the Government of Afghanistan and the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, as the Afghan national human rights institution, to respect, protect, fulfil and promote human rights	• In 2017, UNAMA continued its engagement with the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission on the protection of civilians and the provision of support to human rights defenders and female survivors of violence, and conducted senior-level consultations to promote collaboration with United Nations human rights mechanisms.

Indicators of progress	*Metrics*
	• In 2017, UNAMA and the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission organized 59 events focusing on preserving and widening civil society space, as well as promoting freedom of expression and inclusive peace and reconciliation processes. The events involved 1,475 participants, of which approximately one third were women, in 27 provinces.

V. Economic and social development

Benchmark: government policies, supported by the international community, that promote sustainable economic growth and contribute to overall stability

Indicators of progress	*Metrics*
National priority programmes are designed and implemented with international support and endorsement	• By the end of 2017, the Government had prepared, launched and begun implementation of 2 of the 10 national priority programmes. The remaining 8 programmes are in the preparation phase but are expected to be finalized and launched in 2018.
	• In early 2017, the Government launched the Women's Economic Empowerment National Priority Programme and began its implementation in March.
	• Implementation of the Citizens' Charter National Priority Programme commenced in May 2017.
	• As at 31 December, the national priority programme for the development of the extractives sector was in the final stages of approval by the Government's High Economic Council.
	• In 2017, concept notes or draft texts were developed for the national priority programmes on urban development, agriculture, infrastructure and justice.
More equitable distribution of development assistance and government expenditure throughout Afghanistan	• With ongoing conflict in most parts of the country in 2017, it became increasingly difficult to implement programmes equitably across the country, especially in rural areas. As at late December, implementation of the Citizens' Charter National Priority Programme, the goal of which is to bring basic services and tangible development to remote areas, was being implemented in 32 provinces, 101 districts, 4 cities and nearly 5,000 communities.
	• By 31 December 2017, gender and women's affairs committees, which are mandated to mainstream gender equality initiatives into the work of provincial governments, had been established in all 34 provinces.
Increased revenue collection and sustainable growth based on Afghan resources	• In the first 10 months of 2017, the Government increased revenue collection by 14 per cent, to $1.89 billion, primarily as a result of improvements in the administration and enforcement of tax collection. Owing to the dominance of the informal sector in the economy, most tax revenue continues to be collected from customs, large taxpayers and non-tax revenue sources.

Indicators of progress	*Metrics*
	• Despite improvements in revenue collection, the Government is expected to have covered only 40 per cent of budgeted expenditure in 2017, leaving a fiscal gap of 15 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP), which is projected to increase to 17.4 per cent in 2020. On-budget foreign civilian development assistance will therefore remain critical to maintaining basic services and implementing development programmes.
	• Although the conflict continued to create insecurity and uncertainty and limit economic growth in 2017, the growth rate increased slightly, from 2.2 per cent in 2016 to 2.6 per cent in 2017.
	• To improve the business climate and avoid stifling growth, the Government is considering several tax measures, such as a value added tax, which would simplify the taxation process for businesses.

VI. Regional cooperation

Benchmark: sustained and effective regional coordination in support of prosperity, peace and stability

Indicators of progress	*Metrics*
Improved coordination of regional bodies and increased regional investments	• On 1 March 2017, during the thirteenth summit of the Economic Cooperation Organization in Islamabad, member States adopted the Islamabad Declaration and the Vision 2025, in which a road map was set out for greater regional cooperation and integration over the next 10 years.
	• On 15 and 16 March, during high-level talks held in London between Afghanistan and Pakistan, an agreement was reached to improve cross-border trade, economic and security cooperation. The agreement led to the reopening of official border crossing points that had been closed for a few weeks in February and March 2017.
	• On 14 April, a conference on reconciliation in Afghanistan took place in Moscow with participants from Afghanistan, China, India, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, the Russian Federation, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Participants reiterated that the conflict in Afghanistan had no military solution and must be resolved through intra-Afghan dialogue on the basis of Security Council resolutions. Participants also called upon the Taliban to engage in direct talks with the Government of Afghanistan.
	• On 7 May, the Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran visited Kabul and met with senior government officials. Talks between the Ministers for Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran led to a bilateral cooperation agreement and the establishment of five working committees to implement elements of the agreement.
	• On 8 and 9 June, President Ghani participated in the summit of the Heads of States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Astana.

Indicators of progress	*Metrics*
	During the summit, India and Pakistan became full members of the Organization, and it was agreed that Afghanistan would be admitted to the Organization once it resolves its internal conflict.
	• On 5 August, President Ghani attended the inauguration ceremony of the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Hassan Rouhani, in Tehran. Both parties discussed security and economic cooperation, including the Chabahar port and other infrastructure projects.
	• On 27 August, senior military leaders of Afghanistan, China, Pakistan and Tajikistan attended the meeting of the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism in Counter-Terrorism in Dushanbe.
	• On 11 October, after a seven-year pause, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization held a meeting of the Afghanistan Contact Group in Moscow. The Contact Group is a consultative platform that supports Afghanistan in its fight against terrorism, drugs and criminality and provides support for the sustainable development of the country through the Organization's economic cooperation framework.
	• On 16 October, senior representatives of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan, China, Pakistan and the United States of America participated in a meeting of the Quadrilateral Coordination Group in Muscat to revive peace talks between the Government of Afghanistan and the Taliban. Afghanistan and Pakistan agreed to coordinate the return of refugees, taking into account the onset of winter.
	• During the seventh Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan, which took place in Ashgabat on 14 and 15 November, participants reiterated their support to the process of the Conference and the economic development of Afghanistan. In the margins of the Conference, senior officials from Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey and Turkmenistan signed an agreement to build the Lapis Lazuli transport corridor, giving Afghanistan a new, relatively attractive route to ship its products to Europe.
	• On 30 November, in Istanbul, representatives from Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees gathered for the twenty-ninth meeting of the Tripartite Commission. During the meeting, participants reiterated their commitment to joint resource mobilization and lasting solutions for the protracted displacement of Afghan refugees, including their sustainable return and reintegration into Afghanistan.
	• On 1 December, the seventh Heart of Asia Ministerial Conference on the Istanbul Process on Regional Security and Cooperation for a Secure and Stable Afghanistan took place in Baku. Discussions focused on regional cooperation and common efforts to fight terrorism and concluded with the adoption of the Baku Declaration, in which participating countries emphasized the central role of regional organizations in fostering stability and prosperity and reaffirmed their commitment to expanded economic cooperation and the implementation of established

Indicators of progress	*Metrics*
	confidence-building measures. Meetings of senior officials of the Heart of Asia — Istanbul Process were held in March, September and November, and meetings of regional technical groups were held in March, April, August and November. • From 4 to 6 December, during President Ghani's first official visit to Uzbekistan, 20 bilateral agreements were signed, including agreements on the simplification of transit and customs procedures, a bilateral committee on security was established, an Afghan consulate was opened in Termez, and agreement was reached to construct an additional 1,000-km long electricity transmission line from Surkhan-Darya to Pul-e Khumri and a 400-km railroad from Mazar-e Sharif through Shiberghan and Maymana to Herat. • On 21 December, the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Uzbekistan received the approval of President Ghani for the organization of the ministerial conference on the theme "Afghanistan — path to a peaceful future" in Tashkent, which is scheduled on 26 and 27 March 2018. • On 26 December 2017, the first dialogue of the Ministers for Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan, China and Pakistan was held in Beijing. • On 29 January 2018, the President of Indonesia, Joko Widodo, visited Kabul and offered support for the establishment of an Islamic centre, development projects and the establishment of a trinational committee of ulama from Afghanistan, Indonesia and Pakistan to promote peace and reconciliation efforts in Afghanistan.

VII. Partnership between the Government of Afghanistan and the international community

Benchmark: coherent support by the international community for Afghan priorities within an Afghan-led coordination framework

Indicators of progress	*Metrics*
Increased proportion of aid aligned with the Afghanistan National Development Strategy and government priorities	• In 2017, international donors continued to align their bilateral assistance portfolios with the Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework, a process that will continue in 2018 as the national priority programmes under the Framework continue to be developed and launched.
Improved accountability of procurement and contracting on behalf of the Government and the international community	• According to the National Procurement Authority, as at 31 December 2017, all the contracts signed for 733 high-value projects had been published on its website. • In 2017, the Revenue Department of the Ministry of Finance held bilateral consultations with several donors to discuss the implementation of recommendations from the joint taxation working group in late 2016 to improve the transparency of donor contracts for off-budget programmes.

Indicators of progress	*Metrics*
Strengthening of the Joint Coordination Monitoring Board in support of the Kabul process and as a means of facilitating a regular review of progress on Afghan priorities and mutual commitments	• The Joint Coordination Monitoring Board and the Senior Officials Meeting, which convened in June and October 2017, respectively, succeeded in reinvigorating the regular review of progress made against the development and reform agenda through a new, more discursive format. At the meetings, mutual commitments were confirmed between the Government and international partners and steps were identified for moving forward.

VIII. Counter-narcotics

Benchmark: sustained trend in the reduction of poppy cultivation, narcotics production and drug addiction

Indicators of progress	*Metrics*
Decrease in poppy cultivation, narcotics production and addiction rates	• Poppy cultivation did not decrease. In 2017, the area under opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan was estimated at 328,000 hectares, a 63 per cent increase from the 127,000 hectares estimated in 2016. Opium production in 2017 was estimated at 9,000 tons, an increase of 87 per cent from the 4,800 tons produced in 2016 and a record high for poppy cultivation in the country. • At almost $1.4 billion, equivalent to approximately 7 per cent of the estimated GDP of Afghanistan, the farm-gate value of opium production increased by 55 per cent in 2017 compared with 2016.
Increase in effective interdiction and counter-trafficking efforts	• In 2017, Afghan law enforcement authorities, supported by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), conducted a total of 2,798 counter-narcotics operations, leading to seizures of 2,366 kg of heroin, 64,757 kg of morphine, 47,178 kg of opium, 121 kg of methamphetamine, 62,086 kg of hashish, 2,322 3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA) K-tablets (synthetic drugs), 53,046 kg of solid precursor chemicals and 77,272 litres of liquid precursor chemicals. The operations also resulted in the dismantling of 50 heroin and 3 methamphetamine manufacturing laboratories, the arrest of 3,078 suspects and the seizure of 477 vehicles, 217 weapons, 747 mobile phones and 8 radios.
Increase in licit agriculture and related private capital investment in areas previously used for poppy cultivation	• In 2017, UNODC launched seven alternative development projects, worth $6.5 million, in 35 districts of 18 provinces of Afghanistan, targeting 20,000 rural households.

United Nations S/2018/166

Security Council

Distr.: General
28 February 2018
English
Original: Arabic

Letter dated 26 February 2018 from the Permanent Representative of Egypt to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General and the President of the Security Council

On 18 January 2018, at the Security Council briefing entitled "Weapons of mass destruction: confidence-building measures", the President of the Republic of Poland, in his capacity as the head of the delegation of Poland, said that Egypt had used chemical weapons in Yemen. On instructions from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Egypt, I hereby affirm that the Arab Republic of Egypt categorically rejects this claim, which is not based on any documented facts. Egypt believes that one must exercise due caution and be precise when discussing such information, even if it pertains to historical matters that occurred several decades ago.

Egypt reiterates that it has consistently condemned any use of weapons of mass destruction, including chemical weapons, and recalls its illustrious record in all the legitimate wars that it has waged to defend its unity and territorial integrity against foreign aggression and to uphold freedom and independence in its region at the behest of brotherly Arab and African peoples. In so doing, it has adhered to the established principles of international law and the relevant international instruments, including the Charter of the United Nations.

I should be grateful if you would circulate the present letter as a document of the Security Council, in order to ensure that the facts are recorded for history.

(*Signed*) Mohamed **Idris**
Ambassador
Permanent Representative

18-03147 (E) 010318 020318

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United Nations S/2018/167

Security Council

Distr.: General
1 March 2018
English
Original: Russian

Letter dated 27 February 2018 from the Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

I have the honour to transmit herewith an information bulletin dated 27 February 2018 from the Russian Federation Ministry of Defence regarding the status of implementation of the Memorandum on the creation of de-escalation areas in the Syrian Arab Republic (see annex).

I should be grateful if you would have the present letter and its annex circulated as a document of the Security Council.

(*Signed*) V. **Nebenzia**

18-03241 (E) 020318 050318

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Annex to the letter dated 27 February 2018 from the Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

Information bulletin from the Russian Federation Ministry of Defence regarding the status of implementation of the Memorandum on the creation of de-escalation areas (27 February 2018)

Observance of the ceasefire regime

Monitoring groups have continued to monitor observance of the ceasefire regime as part of implementing the Memorandum on the creation of de-escalation areas in the Syrian Arab Republic, signed by the Russian Federation, the Republic of Turkey and the Islamic Republic of Iran on 4 May 2017.

The Russian representative office of the Russian and Turkish Joint Commission reviewing issues related to violations of the ceasefire regime has reported 16 incidents of gunfire.

The Turkish representative office has reported three incidents of gunfire in Damascus Governorate.

Most of the incidents of mortars and small arms being fired indiscriminately have been reported in areas controlled by fighters belonging to terrorist groups.

Provision of humanitarian aid to the population of the Syrian Arab Republic

Over the past 24 hours the Centre for Reconciliation of Opposing Sides in the Syrian Arab Republic has carried out one humanitarian operation to Rif Dimashq Governorate. Food with a total cargo weight of 1.9 tons was delivered to the local population.

In total, 1,760 humanitarian operations have been carried out.

The total weight of humanitarian cargo delivered is 2,466.2 tons.

Over the past 24 hours, medical assistance has been provided to 134 persons.

In total, medical assistance has been provided to 71,745 persons.

Reconciliation of opposing sides

Over the past 24 hours 11 ceasefire agreements have been signed with populated areas in Hama, Homs and Idlib Governorates.

The number of populated areas that have joined the reconciliation process has increased to 2,407.

The number of armed groups that have announced their commitment to accepting and fulfilling the terms of the ceasefire is unchanged — it is still 234.

United Nations S/2018/168

Security Council

Distr.: General
28 February 2018

Original: English

Letter dated 28 February 2018 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council

I have the honour to refer to resolution 2399 (2018), by which the Security Council decided to extend the mandate of the Panel of Experts on the Central African Republic until 28 February 2019.

Accordingly, I wish to inform you that, after consulting the Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution 2127 (2013) concerning the Central African Republic, I have appointed the following experts:

Mélanie De Groof (Belgium), arms
Romain Esmenjaud (France), finance natural resources
Paul-Simon Handy (Cameroon), regional
Ilyas Oussedik (Algeria), armed groups
Enrica Picco (Italy), humanitarian

I have designated Mr. Esmenjaud to serve as Coordinator of the Panel.

I should be grateful if you would bring this matter to the attention of the members of the Security Council.

(*Signed*) António **Guterres**

18-03115 (E) 020318

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United Nations S/2018/169

Security Council

Distr.: General
5 March 2018

Original: English

Letter dated 28 February 2018 from the Chargé d'affaires a.i. of the Permanent Mission of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council

I have the honour to transmit to you the attached letter from the Syrian Negotiation Commission, transmitting a letter from revolutionary factions and civil groups on the ground in eastern Ghutah regarding their full commitment to the implementation of Security Council resolution 2401 (2018) (see annex).

I would be most grateful if you would have the present letter and its annex circulated as a document of the Security Council.

(*Signed*) Jonathan **Allen**

18-03398 (E) 080318

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Annex to letter dated 28 February 2018 from the Chargé d'affaires a.i. of the Permanent Mission of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council

On behalf of the Syrian Negotiation Commission, it is my honour to transmit to you the following letter from revolutionary factions and civil groups on the ground in eastern Ghutah regarding their full commitment to the implementation of Security Council resolution 2401 (2018). The letter is signed by Jaysh al-Islam (Army of Islam), Faylaq al-Rahman (Rahman Corps), Ahrar al-Sham and civil activist groups in eastern Ghutah.

(*Signed*) Nasr **Al-Hariri**
President of the Syrian Negotiation Commission

Enclosure

[Original: Arabic]

Further to a meeting of representatives of Jaysh al-Islam (Army of Islam), Faylaq al-Rahman (Rahman Corps), Ahrar al-Sham, and civil activist groups in the eastern Ghutah, we should like to transmit the following information:

The Free Syrian Army factions have always been concerned for the safety of civilians in the eastern Ghutah. Accordingly, they have repeatedly insisted on complete respect for international humanitarian law and international human rights law and a full commitment to the rules of engagement set forth in the Geneva Conventions and the two Protocols additional thereto. The Assad regime and its Russian and Iranian allies have repeatedly violated those provisions, not to mention deliberately contravening the Security Council resolutions concerning the situation in Syria. In particular, they have carried out indiscriminate and deliberate military operations against civilian targets. We are committed to the implementation of relevant Security Council resolutions, particularly resolution 2401 (2018), which provides for an immediate ceasefire throughout Syria so that United Nations agencies can deploy urgent assistance convoys to our civilians who, for the last six years, have been besieged in the Ghutah to the east of Damascus city. We hereby declare that the undersigned factions are committed to the effective and genuine implementation of Security Council resolutions 2254 (2015), 2268 (2016) and 2401 (2018). In this regard, we also wish to make the following points:

- We are fully committed to expelling from the eastern Ghutah all elements of the Levant Liberation Organization, the Nusrah Front and Al-Qaida and anyone who belongs to those groups within 15 days of the ceasefire entering into force, in accordance with a mechanism to be agreed in the same period and acting in cooperation with the office of the United Nations Special Envoy for Syria.

- We are committed to ensuring that the necessary environment exists so that the relevant United Nations agencies can facilitate aid and medical convoys to the sick and wounded. We are also committed to protecting the convoys and ensuring the safety of their personnel across the eastern Ghutah.

We stress that we are fully committed to facilitating the work of the relevant United Nations agencies in monitoring implementation of Security Council resolution 2401 (2018). We wish to inform you that despite our commitment to the resolution, the latter is being violated by the regime, its Russian and Iranian allies and its allied militias. We therefore call on the United Nations and its agencies to compel the regime and its allies to take the following actions:

(a) Genuinely cease all hostilities and military operations, irrespective of the weapons used, and bring an end to regime and Russian Federation air force operations in accordance with Security Council resolutions 2254 (2015), 2268 (2016) and 2401 (2018);

(b) Grant secure access to relief convoys, bring an end to attacks on ambulances, and ensure the protection of medical personnel bearing the appropriate emblem;

(c) Allow the evacuation of patients and injured persons in critical condition; ensure that, in the care and under the supervision of the International Committee of the Red Cross, they can reach hospitals in neighbouring countries or areas outside regime control; and, if they are treated in a hospital in Damascus, ensure they are not threatened, detained or imprisoned, and that those accompanying them are not imprisoned;

(d) Stop targeting civilians, educational and medical facilities, places of worship, food warehouses, electrical plants, power stations, water desalination plants or any other vital facilities;

(e) Organize the secure, continuous, regulated and regular delivery of medical and food supplies consistent with the population size of the Ghutah to the east of Damascus, namely some 400,000 people, through crossings supervised by the International Committee of the Red Cross and the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. For that purpose, Free Syrian Army factions have designated the following safe corridors: (1) the Wafidin camp, (2) Harasta and (3) Malihah Jisrayn;

(f) Allow United Nations entities and agencies to enter and operate in the eastern Ghutah under the supervision of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

We further declare that we are prepared to work with the United Nations Special Envoy, or with any other party designated by the Secretary-General or the Security Council for that purpose, to discuss the necessary mechanisms with a view to guaranteeing that Security Council resolution 2401 (2018) is immediately implemented and that the obligations enshrined in international law are fulfilled.

(*Signed*):

Army of Islam
Rahman Corps
Ahrar Al-Sham
Civil activist groups in the eastern Ghutah

United Nations S/2018/170

Security Council

Distr.: General
5 March 2018
English
Original: Arabic

Identical letters dated 27 February 2018 from the Permanent Representative of the Syrian Arab Republic to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General and the President of the Security Council

We have sent you dozens of letters, the most recent of which were our identical letters of 21 February 2018 (S/2018/152), regarding the massacres of Syrians that the so-called international coalition has perpetrated. Further to those letters, I should like to inform you that, on Sunday, 25 February 2018, this coalition, which is led by the United States of America, perpetrated two more massacres of Syrian civilians when its warplanes bombed civilian homes in the villages of Sha'fah and Zahrat Alluni in the eastern countryside of Dayr al-Zawr governorate, killing 29 civilians and causing severe injuries to dozens of others, the majority of whom were women and children. The bombing also damaged civilian homes and property, as well as the villages' infrastructure.

The coalition continues to perpetrate massacres of the Syrian people. Indeed, the number of those massacres is now countless. The coalition also continues to support the remnants of Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant and is striving to reconstitute them as separatist proxy militias of the United States in Hasakah, Raqqah and Dayr al-Zawr governorates. Such conduct confirms that the sole aim of this coalition that flouts international law is to undermine the sovereignty and territorial unity and integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic, and to prolong the Syrian crisis.

The Syrian Arab Republic calls upon the Security Council to fulfil its responsibility to maintain international peace and security, and to act immediately to put an end to the war crimes and crimes against humanity that the coalition perpetrates against the Syrian people, and to prevent the coalition from committing such crimes again. The Council must also act to end the illegal presence of American forces in Syrian territory and prevent the United States from carrying out its underhanded schemes to partition the Syrian Arab Republic and plunder its resources. It is imperative that the Council should do so now that this latest American crime, as well as the crimes that the United States committed in its annihilation of Raqqah, have revealed the true nature of the American Administration's policies. Those polices must be condemned and the persons responsible for them exposed.

I should be grateful if the present letter could be circulated as a document of the Security Council.

(*Signed*) Bashar **Ja'afari**
Ambassador
Permanent Representative

18-03420 (E) 060318 070318

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